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# Casting Call

Incentives are luring moviemakers here, creating jobs, diversifying the economy, and giving Michigan a starring role. But critics say that the state may actually be getting short-changed

BY NANCY NALL DERRINGER



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LEWINSKI

If you went looking for a prototypical Michigan worker of yesterday struggling to become the Michigan worker of tomorrow, you could hardly find a better example than Dan Phillips.

With his burly frame and ponytail, he looks exactly like a guy Hollywood would cast as an autoworker, which is what this Eastpointe man was for the better part of 14 years — for Chrysler, in his case. First at Sterling Heights Assembly and later at the Mopar warehouse, Phillips was part of the bedrock workforce that has sustained southeast Michigan for generations. But everyone knows what's happened with that, and so, when offered a buyout last year, he saw it as a chance to follow another career path, one he'd dreamed of since he was a teen.

Today, Phillips, owner of DP Makeup Studio in St. Clair Shores, sits in his backroom surrounded by carnage. Several busts sit on tables, in various stages of latex construction, on their way to becoming monsters and serial killers. Clear plastic totes are stacked on shelves, holding bottles labeled “blood — drinkable” and “blood — for pumping.” If you wanted to stage a zombie massacre or a make a man look as if he'd been tortured with cigar butts and fingernail clippers, Phillips could make it happen — and has.

Phillips even staged his own personal transformation by leaving the car business for show business. He most recently worked on Intent, a thriller starring Eric Roberts, shot in Livonia and elsewhere in southeast Michigan. His makeup work isn't confined to gore. Before Intent, he did “Come on Over,” a pilot for a children's show, which was shot in Grand Rapids. He hopes to get a union card soon, and pick up more work. Until then, he's teaching makeup techniques, fashion, and special effects at DP Makeup.

Whether many more Michiganders will follow Phillips' example is the underlying question of one of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's more audacious acts of office: signing into law the nation's most generous package of tax incentives for the film industry, a lucrative welcome mat to Hollywood that is so far wildly successful, if we can judge from the local crowds cheering the identifiable locations in Gran Torino, shot in metro Detroit last summer.

The aim, however, is not to elicit cheers, but to provide a springboard for diversifying Michigan's economy, a long-overdue task essential for the state to survive the meltdown of the auto sector. To its advocates, the incentives — \$48 million worth in 2008 productions — are absolutely necessary to lure a well-paying, nimble industry that requires little infrastructure and attracts some of the smartest workers our colleges can turn out. To its detractors, it's all about the appalling image of a destitute state that can't fix its roads cutting checks to multi-millionaires like Clint Eastwood. To both, it boils down to one question:

Can Michigan really play this game?

Jim Burnstein says yes. A working screenwriter and lifelong state resident who teaches his craft at the University of Michigan, he was one of the fiercest advocates for the tax-incentive program when it was being formulated, using his Hollywood contacts to goad the governor to “go big or go home.” This is no time for half-measures, he and other industry professionals urged Granholm; for Michigan to get on Hollywood's radar, they had to offer a package that was the best in the nation. And it is. For production in Michigan,

filmmakers can reap up to 42 percent of their budget in return, should they meet a variety of conditions, including shooting in certain neighborhoods and employing Michigan residents. It's a far better deal than those offered by other states, and Hollywood responded immediately.

"It was a classic case of, 'If you build it, they will come,'" Burnstein says. Scripts and applications for incentives began arriving in the Michigan Film Office almost immediately, and soon productions were under way all over the state. Besides Gran Torino, they included Whip It, a roller-derby comedy starring Drew Barrymore; Virgin on Bourbon Street, a Rob Schneider comedy, and many others, with budgets large and small. And they're still coming. Betty Anne Waters, starring Hilary Swank, was shot in Detroit and Ann Arbor earlier this spring.

Every day, Ken Droz, creative and communications manager for the Michigan Film Office, fields inquiries from out-of-state filmmakers, some of which suggest the state really is unplowed ground in Hollywood. For instance: "Does Michigan have shoreline?" Droz swears they really didn't know, and what's more, they also didn't know that you can't see Wisconsin from the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. (Burnstein got a call from a colleague in Los Angeles, asking if the Upper Peninsula could stand in for Alaska: "I told him, 'The U.P. is Alaska.'") All of which bodes well for the future of the film industry in Michigan.

Plans have been announced for two studios, one in Pontiac, the other downtown, to support filmmakers. Local schools are scrambling to add courses in production skills. People like Dan Phillips are getting up in the morning knowing it's possible to make a living in this new business, without leaving Michigan.



So what's the problem?

Well, how long can a state with budget shortfalls that grow by the week continue to hand out money to anyone, much less Hollywood? That's the question Sen. Nancy Cassis has been asking in the state Legislature. The Novi Republican wants to cap the incentives at a "reasonable" level.

"Money in the general fund needs to go to essential services like K-12 education, higher education, Medicaid," she says. "We're in an economic depression, businesses are closing, we're losing jobs, and people are leaving the state. We're robbing Peter to pay Paul, the Hollywood tycoon." The state, she claims, will see a return of only 18 cents on the dollar, adding that no other state that offers incentives ever profits from them. To Cassis, the jobs created are transient ones that will leave as soon as another state offers a better deal.

It's not a popular position, and legislative observers believe the incentives are safe for the foreseeable future. But it's a legitimate question. Droz says a cap or other limitation on the program would kill the flowering industry before it's had a chance to set down deeper roots. And it's doing so, boosters say.

At a panel discussion at U-M earlier this year, anecdote after anecdote was offered about this Michigan-born actress moving back from Los Angeles, or that promising would-be producer finding enough work here to stay. The incentives are one way to stop the brain drain of creative young people, they add.

Then there's the economic impact. Though hard to quantify, anecdotal evidence shows a financial trickle-down effect. Tracy Fashing, head of sales and marketing for Birmingham's Townsend Hotel, says they've hosted "many above-the-line guests attached to numerous projects filming in and around the Detroit area, which led to significant revenue gain for us and for neighboring businesses." ("Above the line" is industry jargon that, in this case, refers to actors, producers, directors and other high-profile personnel.)

The Townsend markets directly to filmmakers, touting its services and strict lips-zipped confidentiality policy. Of course, the reflected

stardust doesn't hurt anyone. As Fashing says, "The movie productions that have taken advantage of the incentive certainly generate a buzz around the community, and the hotel is delighted to be part of the excitement."

To Bob Brown, a Michigan independent producer and co-founder of Purple Rose Films, who was working here before the incentives (Escanaba in Da Moonlight, Super Sucker, and the upcoming The Bassmaster), the wisdom of Michigan's incentive program is a no-brainer. "We've been losing production work to Louisiana, New Mexico, the Carolinas [which all offer incentives]," he says. "We want this business back. It's clean, doesn't require any infrastructure, attracts positive media attention. Productions will bring jobs, jobs will bring residents, and residents will bring the tax base back." 